



Connections

◆ A JOURNAL BY & FOR ELDERS' WIVES & FAMILIES ◆

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The Cookies of Life

By Ruth Miller

One of my friends gave me a refrigerator magnet that says, "In the cookies of life, friends are the chocolate chips." I'm sure one of the reasons she thought of me is that I am fairly well known for my homemade cookies. Baking cookies is one of my hobbies, and I actually have somewhat of a cookie ministry. I know that sounds funny, but I find chocolate chip cookies really do help win friends and influence people.

I once attended a wedding and was introduced to the husband of an old friend of mine. We didn't know each other, but when he heard my name, he asked, "Mrs. Miller's cookies?"

He knew who I was because of the cookie recipe I gave his wife-to-be many, many years ago.

When Brian, my youngest son, had to write a journal for kindergarten or first grade, his description of me was, "She bakes cookies." So, as you can see, my cookie habit has provided a sort of claim to fame for me.

But what about the cookies of life? Is life really like a cookie? Yes, in some ways it is. And I especially love the thought that friends are the chocolate chips.

Jesus seemed to place an especially high value on friends. He told his disciples they were his friends. And he wanted them to be friends to each other. Instead, they often quarreled among themselves, argued over who was greater or more important, betrayed one another and failed to appreciate the importance of friendship. At least that's what happened before they were converted.

Later on, when you read Acts, you see the deep love Christians had for one another. They loved to spend time together. They shared their possessions. They ate together and they spread the gospel—together.



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Cookies

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How important are friendships to you? I believe our friendships tell a lot about our relationship with God. The Scriptures teach us we will have a harder time understanding the love of God if we can't love the people we see. In other words, our human friendships help us comprehend God's love for us. In developing and maintaining human friendships, we connect with God.

The church, the body of Christ, is designed to operate best as a community of friends. As a strong community of beloved friends we make a powerful witness to the world. However, when that love is missing, we affect the world in a negative way. How sad that so often the Christian witness is that of churches arguing and bickering and being divided.

Let's work on our friendships. Because in the cookies of life, friends really are the chocolate chips!



Ruth works fulltime as office manager for Saint Mark United Methodist Church. She serves in pastoral ministry with her husband, Bob, in the Birmingham and Good Hope, Alabama congregations. Besides baking, she loves to walk and read. She has a passion for women's ministry and is planning a fall retreat. As she's "50 something," Ruth is dealing with the power surges of life (the politically correct term). She says she relates to something Barbara Johnson said, "I thought I had a handle on life, but then it fell off!" E-mail her at ruth.miller@wcg.org.

◆ CONNECTIONS ◆

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Connections
Mission Statement

Primary: The Connections for Clergy Support Department provides intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual support and encouragement in the personal lives of WCG ministry families. Three primary means of serving are the *Connections* journal, the "Connections for a Successful Ministry and Life" web pages, and the Nurturernet forum. We highlight ministry wives but are inclusive of the needs of the entire family.

Secondary: To promote respect, understanding and support for women, their personal ministries and ministries that serve them.



Pond or River?

When I was small, I spent time with my cousins on Grandma's farm. We went looking for excitement down at the pond and discovered some slimy inhabitants. What fun we had catching frogs and wading in the mud. The adults weren't too happy when we made it back to the house in a much worse condition than when we left.

Ponds are messy places, with mud, algae, critters and cattails. With a source of fresh water, ponds can support life, but they can become a little stagnant. The water is still and lacks oxygen. Algae and invasive plants can take over.

By contrast, the fresh water in a flowing river can support many different fish and doesn't stay still long enough to get stale. If I needed a drink, I'd certainly choose a river over a pond!

Our spiritual life can be compared to ponds and rivers. We can be stagnant like a pond—not moving, stale and choked of life. Or we can be fresh and lively like a river.

A river has to have a source. If the source dries up, the river will die. God is our source, giving us life and strength, and constantly renewing us.

In the book of John, Jesus said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:38, *NIV*).

"This invitation to come and drink is the climax of a series of references to water in this Gospel: the water turned to wine (chapter 2), the water of the new birth (chapter 3), the living water (chapter 4), the cleansing

water of Bethesda (chapter 5) and the calming of the waters (chapter 6). All of these have revealed Jesus as the agent of God who brings God's gracious offer of life" (*The InterVarsity Press New Testament Commentary*).

Isn't it marvelous how God provides for the thirsty (all of us) in this dry and weary land where there is no water (Psalm 63)? All he requires of us is to come and drink. Anyone and everyone can drink the water of life. Why then do so many thirsty people stand before the well and refuse to drink?

Are you thirsty, maybe even dehydrated? Are you like a stale, stagnant pond? Refreshment and renewal are as close as your Bible and as instant as a prayer.

As usual, I hope this issue of *Connections* provides some sips of water that will send you searching for hearty gulps of living water. You can use the articles as a diving board into the pool. (Don't you love all the analogies to water?)

And don't forget to share your cup of cold water with other thirsty souls. There's plenty for everyone!

Tammy

Connections Online

You may access *Connections* at www.wcg.org/online; click on *Connections for Clergy Family Support*; the link for *Connections* the journal appears on the left.



Book Review



The Journey of Desire

Author: John Eldredge
Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000

Reviewed by Sue Berger

The Journey of Desire is the sequel to *The Sacred Romance*, co-written with Brent Curtis, who died soon afterward in a climbing accident. In *Romance* the authors describe our lives as a grand epic story of which we see only a small part—our part. They encourage us to join God in the great adventure and to see God as the hero in our life story.

In *The Journey of Desire*, Eldredge encourages us to rediscover our God-given desires and passions and to search again for the life we once dreamed of. Many times we settle for a life of the mundane, convinced it's just the way life is. Yet we're surprised and haunted by moments when the whole of life comes together in a way that seems good and right and what we've been waiting for. We wish those moments could go on forever. They're hints of the life God intends for us—a glimpse into eternity. Eldredge contends that eternal life is not primarily about duration but quality of life, "life to the limit."

As our lives grind on, we trade our passions for more manageable and achievable goals. We look to other sources for fulfillment and security; spouse, career or financial portfolio. We take our adventures carefully and vicariously by working out in gyms instead of hiking the woods, watching sports instead of playing them and viewing

Survivor on television instead of challenging ourselves physically. We use the instant gratification and pleasures of our society to numb our nagging sense that there really isn't more to it than this.

Eldredge challenges us to identify the substitutes and addictions in our lives that distract us from our God-given passions—to recapture the vision of the love affair God desires to have with us. Creation, with its beauty, strength, gender and sexuality, serves as a living metaphor of his desire for us.

Because of disappointing human experiences, we may grow cynical about whether intimacy is really possible. He encourages us not to be embarrassed by our hunger for intimacy or feel guilty about the depth of our desire, yet warns us not to settle for other options apart from God. We must choose to trust God to satisfy our passions and trust his love for us.

This is an encouraging book. Eldredge explores aspects of letting go, waiting on God, thirsting, surrendering and remaining steadfast. If you need a shot of inspiration and a peek into the future God holds for us, this book is for you. 🍀

I want to know how God created this world. I am not interested in this or that phenomenon, in the spectrum of this or that element. I want to know His thoughts; the rest are details.

—Albert
Einstein



Fashion Begins at Home

By *Hannah Knaack*

Fashion begins at home. Perhaps we should rephrase that. Fashion and style, or lack thereof, starts at home.

Surely you know what I'm talking about. As they pass through the kitchen you ask, "Didn't you wear that shirt yesterday (the day before, and the day before that)?" Predictably, they respond, "So?" Or you catch them as they're leaving, "You're not really going to wear that combination are you?" It's obvious the fashion gene has skipped certain members of the family.

Mind you, I'm not implying God makes mistakes, but one of those faulty gene types resides in our home. While I may not want to be seen in public with him, he doesn't drain my wallet like my continuous clothes changer. Not overly concerned about fashion, this child must have clean clothes and lots of them. Thank goodness for automatic washers. A tiny spot or faint smudge sends him back to the closet for an entirely new ensemble.

This strange behavior (although I prefer to think of my immediate family as normal) will be repeated several times a day. At 6 years old, he was a clean freak. I tried explaining to him on several occasions that boys were supposed to be dirty. He just looked at me as if I'd grown another head.

Finally, there's the fashion coordinator sibling. They wouldn't dream of wearing the same outfit twice in one week (ghastly) or not coordinating their colors and styles. Make no mistake about it—style is of extreme importance to this choosy child! They like everything to be glamour magazine perfect.

This affliction usually enters fashion-obsessed children between the ages of 7 and 12 when they become very specific about

the clothes you buy them. Offering suggestions of what to wear ("Honey, this shirt was a gift from Grandma") will most likely bring about total meltdown.

By 12 or 13 they have become entangled in the belief their parents, specifically Mom, have no fashion sense whatsoever. Comments such as, "Mom, why do you always dress like Grandma?" are common. Then there's the exaggerated get-with-it eye roll they send your way when you ask, "Do these shoes go with this dress?" Mention clothes shopping and they magically produce a long list of friends they'd rather go with.

When my teen asked, in front of her two hormone-charged brothers, why Aunt Lisa didn't wear a bra with more support, I drew the line. She could style and accessorize all she wanted with her wardrobe, but meddling in other's had to stop.

I'm thankful college provided a fresh training ground for this fashion-focused young adult. During her fall break I was pleasantly surprised when she asked to borrow one of my shirts and my push-up bra. "Sure, no problem," I replied.

I didn't bother to tell her the bra would be useless at her age. After all, things are as up as they're going to be at 18. Well, she'll find that out eventually. Someday her daughter may break it to her gently.



Hannah says: "I'm delighted my daughter, Sarah, a college senior, still does a fashion showing for me after each trip to the clothing store. These precious times won't last forever and I cherish them. And, in spite of her comments in regard to my fashion sense, she has raided my closet on several occasions this summer!" E-mail Hannah at justmomhkl@juno.com.



The Grass Is Always Greener—on God's Side

By Sheila Dela Peña

Picture this, you enter your favorite restaurant, and your stomach is grumbling from inexplicable hunger. But you can't decide what food to order from the wrinkled and all-too-familiar menu, even though you've eaten there many times. So you sneak a peek at the tables you pass, hoping your peripheral vision is as acute as it is subtle, to see what everyone else is having. You know you've always loved the restaurant's extra crispy fried



chicken, but the burritos, fish and chips and coleslaw on the other tables suddenly look ten times more appetizing.

Your order arrives and you realize immediately after your first bite of the chunky burritos you should have followed your instincts and ordered your usual fried chicken.

In much the same way, have you ever noticed how plants are always greener after a rain? The grass and trees are somewhat taller (or I could be imagining it), the shrubs have somehow grown more leaves, and the atmosphere in the garden is fresher and cleaner. My husband and I are always surprised after a day of rain (and just a good mowing two days before) to see our garden bursting with life. This never happens when we water it. We can water the plants all day and still not get the same glorious results. Our plants would most likely drown.

I have had only three potted plants in my entire life—one was a money tree, the second was a basil plant and the third was a Chinese good luck bamboo shoot. Of my

three potted plants, only the money tree survived for more than a year (the other two didn't last more than a month), and this because I left it out in the garden for Mother Nature to take care of. But alas! As history has shown me twice, it, too, faced an early demise. Our hyperactive Labrador pup chewed all its leaves and toppled the pot. Need I say more?

Leaving our home now and going farther north into Alaska—hypothetically speaking—I watched with envy on *The Discovery Channel* as the bears freely caught and ate live, pink salmon. There was more than enough fish for all the bears, and the leftover fish swam upstream, changed color and died. Wow! I didn't know whether I should have felt bad the salmon died or that we humans have to pay so much just to get a taste of fresh salmon. The bears have it so good.

The point of it all: the grass is always greener, and fresher, on God's side. Everything our almighty God has created is good (1 Timothy 4:4). Our God sustains the earth and all creation by his powerful Word (Hebrews 1:3)! Can it get any better, or greener, than that?

On a human level, we tend to perceive what our fellow humans have as better than what we have. Someone else always has a better house, a newer car, a more fulfilling job, a bigger church and a plate of tastier food. Try as we might, struggle as we ought, we can never find the lasting fulfillment we need or the most satisfactory results from other people or from anything manmade. The grass is not always greener on man's (or woman's) side. If anything, our constant struggle to have it better will wear us out and only last us our lifetime, or less.

Wouldn't you want to have it better for eternity? Yes, I believe the grass is always greener on the other side, the side that leads

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The Grass Is Greener

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to heaven. King David believed it when he said, “Blessed is the man...(whose) delight is in the law of the Lord.... He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers” (Psalm 1:1-3, *NIV*).

No wonder nature has it so good! We can have it too, if we stay on God’s side. Um, can I have the extra crispy fried chicken instead?



Sheila has finally begun writing the first few chapters of her book but she’s encountering writer’s block. It deals with answered prayers and requires a lot of kneebends and guidance. She hopes to finish it in her lifetime. E-mail her at sheila_de-lapena@yahoo.com.



Christians are found almost everywhere, but they are not necessarily found anywhere; sometimes they are found in church, but not all persons in churches are Christians. What persons do outside the churches is the test.

—James E. Sweaney, *Progress*,
Unity School of Christianity



I Was Just Thinking...

...about the kind of art I like and I realized my favorite art is always connected to nature. I discovered a wonderful artist—even better than Thomas Kincaid. Once in a while his color choices are so vibrant they are beyond real, and sometimes he manages to mix colors in a way that seems iridescent. It’s amazing.

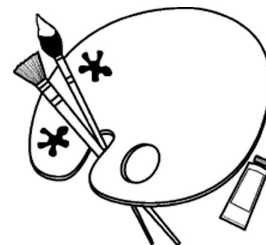
I have found his works displayed in out-of-the-way places. He depicts the beauties of nature in the most barren areas. He seems able to draw attention to the resiliency of nature in harsh conditions. If you see beauty in the plainest creatures and don’t mind the occasional use of bright, nearly fluorescent color, you might appreciate his work, too.

You will find some of his works displayed fairly close to your own area as he works hard at getting his art out to folks of all stations and incomes.

Anyway, it’s worth a look. If you find any of his works of art, look deeply and closely at his attention to detail and color. He is truly amazing. So here’s the name of the artist and I hope you have fun finding some of his work—God.

I was just thinking...

—Kathy Miller
Everett, Washington



The Adulterous Woman

John 8:1-11

By Joyce Catherwood

The adulterous woman in John 8:1-11 was used by the religious leaders to trap Jesus so they could accuse him. She may have been set up by the leaders and possibly even her partner. Listen to the voice of our sister:

“It was just before dawn when the door to our hiding place burst open and slammed against the wall. The religious leaders stormed into the room in all their finery. Wealthy and powerful they were, and to be feared. My head was spinning. I had no idea how they discovered us. My lover made me feel so safe. But I remember the look on his face as he just stood there silently while the Pharisees grabbed me and shoved me out the door. Did he betray me?”

“I was quickly sandwiched between two fast-walking Pharisees who gripped my arms tightly, leaving bruises. They rushed me, stumbling, through the streets. Where was my lover? Why didn’t they bring him too?”

“Fighting back the tears, I panicked, terrified as to where they were taking me and what they were going to do. It all happened so fast; I barely had time to cover myself. I didn’t dare look up as we passed shopkeepers and vendors setting up for the day. I felt sickened and humiliated beyond words.

“When we arrived at the temple, my captors plowed through a huge crowd until we reached Jesus, who was seated, teaching those who had gathered. They pushed me in front of Jesus, interrupting him, loudly proclaiming they had caught me in the act of adultery. As I stood there disheveled and



exposed, I could only imagine the looks of sheer disgust and salacious whispering going on behind me.

“I knew full well what I had done was wrong, one of the gravest sins according to Jewish law. But I couldn’t resist the flattering attention and tenderness of my lover. In our culture, women have few rights. Our marriages are arranged at childhood. We become the property of our husbands. Many marriages are loveless, to husbands who are arrogant and overbearing. It is easy to be starved for affection and vulnerable.

“The religious leaders blurted out: ‘The law of Moses says we should stone her. What do you say?’ Jewish leaders rarely carried out their own law in matters like this because Roman law forbade capital punishment. But I was still horrified they might actually kill me in such a brutal way. Again, I wondered, where was my lover? By law he should be stoned as well.

“Frozen with fear, I looked at Jesus, expecting the same condemnation. But he stooped down and began to write in the dust with his finger. I was grateful he chose not to glare at me like everyone else. Still unaware of my fate, my heart pounded so loudly I was afraid I wouldn’t hear Jesus’ answer.

“The leaders kept repeating their question, demanding Jesus answer them. Jesus finally stood up and said, ‘If any of you be without sin, let him be the first to cast a stone.’ Then he bent down again and wrote more on the ground. Trembling, I braced myself, waiting to be bashed by the first stone. Instead, one by one, beginning with the eldest, my accusers quietly moved through the crowd and disappeared, leaving me standing before Jesus.



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By Carmen Fleming

“Jesus straightened up and asked: ‘Where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?’ Shaken, I nervously answered, ‘No one, Lord.’ Then Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you.’ He told me I was free to go and I should leave my life of sin. The terror that had gripped me gave way to a flood of tears and a relief I cannot describe.

“That day, I, as well as the people who had gathered at the temple, witnessed the amazing grace of God, something far beyond our capacity to understand until Jesus entered our lives. I was covered with his mercy and forgiven. I was never the same again.”



Joyce says even though retirement takes some adjustment, the extra time devoted to being with the grandchildren is well worth it. She says their 4-year-old grandson looked up at his grandpa and said, “Papa, you’re my best friend.” E-mail her at joyce.catherwood@wgc.org.



There’s a wideness in God’s mercy
Like the wideness of the sea;
There’s a kindness in His justice
Which is more than liberty.



—Frederick William Faber

When I was called by God I camped out in the Psalms, and I still do. I remember reading the Psalms in Spanish to my mom. She would correct any mispronunciations to help my reading skills improve. Over the years I have come to appreciate this book even more. I often turn to the Psalms and read a few to create a context for worship.

Psalms is probably one of the most read books of the Bible. In Hebrew the whole collection is called *Praises*. Jesus used the Psalms and they were often quoted by New Testament authors. It’s a great place to start to worship God in prayer.

The authors of Psalms write about God with great passion. One senses with David, in particular, honesty, dependence and love, yet also anger, disappointment, fears and heartaches. Every range of human emotion is expressed. David lived a life of dependence on God. His actions, feelings and experiences were filtered through the greater reality of God the Creator and Savior. A.W. Tozer describes him as a God-possessed man, a God-intoxicated man, a man completely preoccupied with God, “steeped in the Levitical tradition, but never lost in the forms of religion.”

David’s psalms teach me that God desires truth in the inward parts (Psalm 51:6). In his close relationship with God, David found it extremely important to open himself up to the Holy Spirit’s scrutiny, for his diagnosis and prescription for healing. The healing process begins with honesty before God. Honesty doesn’t come easily or naturally, but the Psalms are particularly helpful in getting us started. We see the range of feelings in the Psalms and wherever we are in

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Prepare to Worship

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the day-to-day reality of life, we can find expression for our own feelings through the Psalms. We can be honest before God no matter how negative we feel. Only by admitting truths about our inner being can we find healing for our sin-sick souls, only then can we become human as God intended

from the beginning, and one day see the face of God as he is.

The sovereignty of God is powerfully expressed in the Psalms. Even when life's events seem to be going contrary to our plans, we have a God who wants us to know we can trust him with our lives.

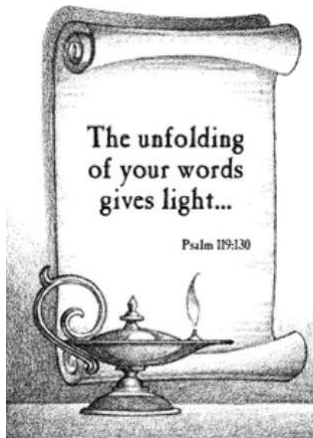
From time to time a verse from the Psalms seems lifted up from the page because it is the perfect expression of my heart. It becomes my prayer point and my cry throughout the day or weeks ahead. In the process something happens at the soul level that strengthens, encourages and gives me peace. The Word of God has the power to do something on the inside—difficult to explain but real nevertheless.

On one occasion I led a spiritual retreat for girls ages 15 to 18. Girls and women of different denominations and practices in this type of spiritual retreat made up the work team. Our goal was to create an environment where Jesus would be lifted up and would draw these girls to himself. In preparation for the retreat I read Psalm 24. While reading I felt a boldness I usually lacked and a courage and confidence God would take care of any difficulties that could develop on the team or with the participants. This psalm gave me the focus I needed. It was

not about my skills or abilities but rather the King Jesus who would do his spiritual saving work in spite of our human limitations. Verse 8 in particular spoke to my disquiet: "Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle."

At the end of the weekend retreat we saw and experienced the power of God to take care of the difficult situations that developed on the team and also to bring some of the participants to repentance and faith in Jesus.

I highly recommend the Psalms as a means to enter into a time of worship in the presence of the Lord. Read a few as you begin your session of worship and let the Psalms create a context that will lead you to prayer and praise.



Carmen and Charles live in Florida. Since 1991, they have served in the Caribbean regional office, and enjoy the mixture of Latin American and Caribbean cultures that seem to fuse with the American culture there. Carmen loves to read, take long walks and dance. She also loves to work in her garden and decorate her home. E-mail her at carmen.fleming@wgc.org.



But I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, "You are my God."
My times are in your hands;
deliver me from my enemies
and from those who pursue me.



—Psalm 31:14-15, *NIV*

Who Am I?

By Joanna Mitchell

11

Who am I? I've repeated those words in my mind when I see divine assignments, as I call them, coming my way. These aren't assignments I think up or choose to do, but after ignoring them for a period of time, a little nudge keeps at me until I recognize it's most likely the Holy Spirit telling me to move forward.

A song by Casting Crowns called *Who Am I?* wonders why God cares enough to know our names and to feel our pain. The song continues to give a message of the incredible love shown to us because of who Jesus is, not because of who we are. Who are we but a little dot in the universe, yet so loved by the One who created us! The lyrics to the song have made me wonder who am I to start a ministry, stir up some activity, spur people on to good works, lead a study group or write this article. I'm not anyone special and I can name a multitude of people who would do a better job at all those things.

I received a divine nudging a couple of years ago to start a ministry for ministers' wives in my area. I ignored it for several months. Some of the churches have several thousand people attending and dozens of the churches have been around for a long time and have well-established ministries. Who was I to do anything about it? Who would respond or listen if I pursued this ministry? I was the pastor's wife of probably the smallest church in the area.

Eventually the nudge grew strong enough and I mailed out a letter to several dozen churches, inviting the wives of pastors to meet together. Our first event brought 15 women to hear Kathleen Hart and Jannice May speak at a brunch. Several expressed interest in getting together to do a book study, which we began about a year ago.

Since that time, I've met with four faithful ministry wives who've become close friends. We've found we need each other's friendship. We share thoughts, ideas and the joys and the burdens of ministry. We are now discussing how to reach out and offer friendship to more women in ministry or even sponsor a ministry event open to all women in our community.

I talked with my friend Allison who is married to a Lutheran pastor. She's responsible for writing her church newsletter. I'm on the newsletter mailing list, so it's interesting to see how she writes about the books we've read in our group. We talked about how we often say, "Who am I?" and yet we've realized we have quite an influence in our small part of the world.

Our little group read *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* by Jim Cymbala of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Church. I first read this book more than seven years ago and was inspired by the story of how prayer greatly affected his church to become a thriving, vibrant church in the poorest, drug-infested part of the city. Allison loved the book and passed it on to her prayer team at church, which was a group of maybe five people at the time. They loved the book. The prayer team has grown in size, has more focused prayer and is experiencing more answered prayers.

The thread of influence is interesting to watch. A church is growing, now that they've read a book, which Allison suggested, because I suggested it, because I met Allison, because I followed the nudge of the Holy Spirit to start a group for ministers' wives. Did you follow that thread of influence? Allison's church also has several book study groups reading the same books from our book study. Those study groups have grown from being all members of the same church to being multid denominational.



Who Am I?

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I'm watching women young in Christian faith grow in understanding. Ministries are developing from these groups. A group of women from one book study took on the task of ministering to a home for single mothers and their children after being nudged by the Holy Spirit. Not only are

they serving women they don't know, but also they are passionate about their serving! These are women who haven't stepped into a church since they were children. Without the influence of studying a book together, under the direction and influence of a pastor's wife, this project would not have included these women, now growing

in their Christian faith.

Who am I? Nobody special. But I've heard God uses nobodies. You've probably seen lists of the flawed people in the Bible God used for his purpose: Moses, who used all kinds of excuses to get out of doing what God told him to do; Rahab, a harlot of

all things, who was spared because she hid messengers of the Lord (and got her story recorded in the Bible!). Then there was Paul, who persecuted Christians. I probably wouldn't have picked him to lead the entire New Testament Church, but God did. It's encouraging to know we don't have to be perfect, famous or even greatly talented to do something of influence for the Lord. We only need to be willing.

What is the Holy Spirit nudging you to do? The little voice that keeps popping up—that's him. Say yes and see what thread of influence will begin.



Joanna is working on her business, Ultimate Power: Christian Strategies for an Extraordinary Life, a curriculum to help poverty stricken people pursue a better life. She also manages rental properties, runs a book study, is active in church and has returned to college to complete a degree in Organizational Leadership. E-mail her at mcottage@sbcglobal.net.

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A Mission Trip Changes Everything

By Cheryl Shallenberger

My church, Christ Fellowship Church, in Cincinnati, Ohio, sent a mission trip group of teens and adults to New Orleans to help members, relatives of members and friends of members of our denomination hit hard from Hurricane Katrina in December 2005. We sent another group of 35 people in June. I was blessed to be able to join our second mission trip. Those who weren't able to go on the mission trip helped support the trip by their donations and prayers. Those prayers gave every one of us energy to do what we needed to do.

A mission trip changes everything. It not only changes, helps and inspires the people you help, but it also changes the missionaries. No one is ever the same after going on a mission trip. One's whole outlook on life changes. I went to help others and came back feeling I was the one who was helped the most.

To drive through New Orleans and see street after street of deserted homes is mind boggling. This is the United States, but it looks like a war zone. After seeing New Orleans, I no longer feel the need to go on a costly mission trip outside the United States when for a few dollars, we can go down the road and help people in our own country. Only a few homes are being worked on because the contractors in the area are busy working on government or business buildings. It was hard to leave New Orleans knowing so much work was left to do.

The homeowners need our help. To meet and speak with them and see their positive outlook, while we dragged out everything they owned and dumped it on the curb is gut-wrenching. No one can do this and not have his or her heart changed forever.

Hurricane Katrina damaged 200,000 homes. Most of them were flooded and need to be gutted. Gutting a home involves removing all items from the home to the street. Walls need to come down and all nails pulled from 4x4s. These items are people's lives: their pictures, their memories, everything they owned.

Our group helped seven homeowners on this last trip. Thousands more need help. As we worked one hot day toward the end of our week, Jackie Lakeberg, a teen from our church, asked me what would happen if we didn't finish this particular house by the end of the day. We were all exhausted, but wanted to go on. I started to answer her question by saying this was house No. 6 on our list, and it would be house No. 1 on the list for the next mission trip. But as I was giving this logical answer, it hit home to me the magnitude of what I was saying, and what really needed to be done. It was all I could do not to break down and cry on the spot.

When would the next group be coming down? I didn't know. Has another mission group gone down after us? I hope so, but Mike Horchak said only a handful of WCG congregations have sent mission groups to help.

We have new church members because of our first mission trip to New Orleans. Two friends of my daughter, Kayla, who went on the first mission trip, have been attending church with us for months since then and now consider our church their own. They also went on the second mission trip with us. People joined our group who were not in our denomination but heard through friends or relatives that we were going to New Orleans. People want to be involved and help, but sometimes don't know how to get started.

If you want to schedule a trip to New Orleans, contact WCG pastor Mike Horchak at mike.horchak@wcg.org and let him know

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Mission Trip

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when your group can come. He is coordinating the work and knows the needs of the people. Skilled laborers who know carpentry, electrical and plumbing are needed. You can also contact my husband, Rick Shallenberger, who was instrumental in planning and organizing our trips and can give you helpful planning ideas for your trip.

Maybe you aren't able to send people from your church, but your church would still like to help in some way. You might consider financial sponsorship. Or maybe your church has people who have the time and energy to go, but you don't have the financial resources. We are planning another trip December 26 to January 1. Perhaps you can join us. You can contact my husband for details.

It was an honor to be able to help this disaster-stricken area. Going to New Orleans changed everything for me personally and it has changed my church. Consider planning a trip to New Orleans and watch the changes in your churches, in your lives and in your hearts!



Cheryl and Rick serve the West Cincinnati, Ohio, church area. They have been married almost 21 years and have three children: Kayla, 17, Kyle, 15 and Lucas, 11. She stays busy with church and her children's sports and band activities. Cheryl works full-time as a legal secretary in downtown Cincinnati. In her spare time she loves to hone her housewife skills by cleaning, canning salsa and organizing all the stuff a family can accumulate in 20 years. E-mail Cheryl at cshallenberger@fbtlaw.com.

Connections

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Zorro and Me

Have Bus, Will Travel

By Barbara Dahlgren

Years ago, a church bus was a mainstay of a congregation—especially if you lived in a rustic area like Kentucky. We've had a bus or two in our time, and they served us well.

Our church bus was never a Greyhound or charter vehicle replete with reclining chairs and restrooms. More than likely it would be an old, retired, yellow school bus purchased at a bargain basement price, in desperate need of a face-lift and an overhaul.

"What a deal!" we'd say. And after a new coat of paint—anything but yellow—and an engine rebuild, we were good to go. Our motto was, "Have Bus, Will Travel."

A good church bus—one that was running—could offer many benefits for a rural congregation. It provided transportation to church for those who had no other way to get there.

When our denomination had week-long festivals in various parts of the country, the church bus allowed many to attend who could not afford to go. If we had get-togethers with churches in other areas or activities several hours away, we would park our cars in a designated area, then all ride together on the bus. It was a sort of park and ride before the term "park and ride" was thought of. We were so-o-o-o ahead of our time!

A church bus provided much more than cheap transportation. A true bond was formed among our members. Whether you want to or not, you connect with your neighbor when you're bouncing down the highway. This camaraderie and fellowship built friendships. We'd share coolers of

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Have Bus

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drinks and snacks, play games and sing songs. It seemed like the bumpier the ride, the happier the sing-a-long.

Now a church bus needs a good mechanic—actually it needs a great mechanic. Homer was a great mechanic. Short and stocky, Homer was full of faith and enthusiasm. Once he read the scripture about anointing the sick with oil. Homer's cow was "powerful sick" and his family needed that cow badly. Many laughed when Homer poured oil on the cow's head and prayed a prayer of faith.

They stopped laughing when that cow got well immediately. This was just the kind of faith we needed in a church bus mechanic.

Zorro did a lot of youth work in those days. Each year, Zorro and Homer would take teens to our church summer camp in Michigan on our bus. They would pick up teens from other areas en route, thus supplying affordable rides for many who might not have been able to attend. It took about three days to get to camp from Kentucky; camp lasted about three weeks and then they headed home.

On one particular trip, the bus broke down next to a field just outside of Cincinnati, Ohio. A church bus breakdown was no big surprise, because our church bus did this from time to time. It always seemed to

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happen in the middle of nowhere. That's why you never want to take a trip on one without your great mechanic on board.

Once we made the mistake of sending an auto parts store owner on one of these trips, thinking it was synonymous with being a mechanic. Not true. When the bus broke down, he looked under the hood, but was clueless as to how to fix it. He did know how much each part cost, which was not real helpful in the middle of nowhere. But I digress.

So there they were outside of Cincinnati. Homer hopped out of the bus, opened the hood and started poking at the engine. Soon he dislodged something, threw it in the overgrown field, and said, "We don't need that." He went back to fiddling with the engine and another part fell off. Again, Homer threw it in the field and said, "We don't need that either." Now these weren't little nuts and bolts. They looked like major pieces of equipment you might need to keep a vehicle running. I'm not sure how many parts he tossed away, but enough to have Zorro concerned. Then he connected a few wires and said, "Start her up."

Zorro tentatively got behind the wheel, turned the key in the ignition, and vroom, vroom, the engine started right up. It purred like a kitten. We had no further mishaps and the church bus buzzed down the road as

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I have never committed the least matter to God, that I have not had reason for infinite praise.



—Anna Shipton

Blessed is the man who is too busy to worry in the daytime, and too sleepy at night.



—Earl Riney:
Church Management

Have Bus

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smooth as could be.

Zorro and I learned a big lesson that day. We've thought many times about how we encumber ourselves with things we feel are so necessary in life. We carry burdens we don't need to bear instead of casting them on God who willingly bears them for us. We weigh ourselves down with extraneous things we feel we need to keep functioning in today's society, when much of what we think is necessary may not be vital at all. It's surprising how much you can let go of and still buzz down the road of life purring like a kitten.

Somewhere along the journey, church buses became more of a liability than an asset. Litigation-happy people would target them for giant lawsuits, thinking they could get big bucks suing a church. Now, only very rich churches can afford them. They usually get something like a Greyhound or luxurious charter vehicle. It's not a fixer upper, schoolyard reject such as we used to have, but God doesn't always use the lush and the plush to do his work.

I learned a lot about life's journey riding in an old, uncomfortable church bus. "Have Bus, Will Travel" was our motto, but it represented more than getting from one place to another. It taught us how to enjoy the ride.



Barbara and Mel (Zorro) have been married for 37 years and have worked in ministry all over the U.S., including 10 years in Kentucky. Mel now pastors the San Jose, California, church. E-mail her at bydahlgren@pacbell.net. She loves hearing from you. (© August 2006)

Connections

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Fantasy Island

By David W. Gibbs

This morning as I prayed, my mind wandered over various events from my past. It wasn't a morbid reflection, but thanksgiving for the grace of God in my life and for those who surround me. A line from a song from the 1970s, *Young, Gifted and Black*, said, "There are times when I look back and I am haunted by my youth." In a right and balanced way it is good to remember what God has called us from, what Jesus saved us from or for and that the Holy Spirit helps us learn the lessons from these experiences. With that focus one hopes and prays never to return to the murky clay or the valley of the shadow of death, as the Psalmist writes.

While I was having these thoughts a letter came through the letterbox that reminded me of one of the many foolish and sinful events of my past. My instinctive reaction was to start to get down on myself. A million thoughts rushed through my head, good and bad, as I wrestled with myself. How could I have been so stupid? Does God really love me? If people knew about it, how would they view me? What sort of example am I? Why do I keep repeating the same sins? Has God forgiven me? Have I truly repented? Why is God so good to me?

Then I told myself I have a choice. Am I going to contradict the very thoughts and feelings I was thanking God for a few minutes earlier? Several scriptures, hymns and quotations came to mind. I surveyed my various relationships and responsibilities. Once again joy and gratitude filled my heart with pictures of divine mercy that captivated my mind. One passage of scripture inspired me.

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us

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Fantasy Island

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to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you” (Titus 2:11-15, *NIV* throughout).



I am learning that much of my Christian battle goes on in my head. It needs to come out. As one of my teachers regularly reminded us, “You must pray it out, cry it out or talk it out.” In my head many of my thoughts take on a life of their own—a real fantasy island. No writer of fiction could put to paper some of the scenarios I have constructed. But our great Creator gives us avenues of release from what could harm us, and bring us to wholeness and reality in Christ.

Do I believe? Yes, but please Lord, help my unbelief.

My desire, and basic message, is to live my life in positive response to glorify God and serve others. It is all based on his unending love and amazing grace. It must engage my whole being, mind, body, soul and strength. I need lots of help because it can't be done alone or overnight. First and foremost I need power from our Triune God. Then from you, my friend, walk with me. I thank God for you. To quote my professor again, please remember me, “spiritually, emotionally, physically, intellectually and

socially.”

Together, through our Heavenly Father, our minds will be transformed, our bodies will be changed and we will be part of the ongoing privilege of telling of the great, great story. Let us remind ourselves often of these things. Also remember that the nations and our neighbors need to hear the good news. This is no fantasy and there is no conspiracy, which is the diet of so many today. “Therefore, my dear brothers [and sisters], stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).



David and Alberta serve the Birmingham, England, church. They will celebrate 20 years of marriage in November. Their two richest blessings are their children, Sarah and Michael. David works for the Royal Bank of Scotland and also serves as a Magistrate. He is on the Board of Trustees for both the British Plain Truth and Worldwide Church of God. Hobbies include reading, trying to write, annoying people and chess. E-mail him at dwgibbs62@btinternet.com.

The Lord will clean up the garbage in our life, but he'll only take away the trash that we put out.

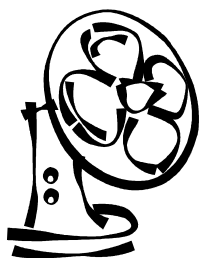


—Florence Littauer

A Fan-tastic Morning

By Sue Berger

I love it when a friend calls with a God-moment experience. One morning a few weeks ago a girl friend was blow drying her hair and plugged in a small floor fan to cool herself. The fan started vibrating so hard it began moving across the floor. My friend smiled, amused by the fan's action. As she watched it scooting across the room, she realized the base wasn't providing the locomotion, but the whirling of the blades. The motor was providing the internal motivation. Looking behind the fan, she could see the cord leading to the electrical outlet in the wall.



That's when the ah-ha moment struck that led to her phone call. She explained that we're all like that little fan. We can't move on our own. It's the whirling energy inside of us (the Holy Spirit), powered through the cord or lifeline (Jesus), plugged into the power source (God the Father). The cooling breeze we produce is impossible without God.

Awesome how God can turn a mundane getting-ready-for-work morning into a profound object lesson about his involvement in our lives, isn't it?

Imagination was given to man
to compensate him for what he isn't,
and a sense of humor to console
him for what he is.



—Unknown

As I reflected on her story (now my morning was affected as well!), I found myself smiling too—for several reasons. That my friend would call to share the experience. That God works with each of us in such creative ways. That our hearts are open to see God in the mundane. But my mind kept going back to one word my friend used at the beginning of her story: *amused*.

What caught her attention in the first place was amusement. The little fan vibrating across the floor was funny. It compelled her to stop a moment and watch it. That's all the opening God needed.

As a Christian, is my life like that? Do I dance across the floor while producing a cooling breeze? Am I so energized I can't contain it? Do I exhibit something that causes those around me to pause, smile and think, I like this. Why is she like that? Does my life arouse curiosity about a wonderful way to live? Do I provide God with openings?

We live in a troubled, serious and stressed-out world. I'm blessed to know a few people who are positive and upbeat without fail. I'm attracted to them. They're enjoyable and refreshing. What about me? What about you?

Come on. Let's dance!



Early mornings are the only time Sue can enjoy her patio in central Texas with summer's 100+ degree temps for weeks on end—and that's only by sitting in front of a fan! She's looking forward to fall. She says, "If anyone would like to send us some rain, we'd certainly take it." E-mail her at sueberger2000@hotmail.com. (© 2006 Sue Berger)



In the Shadow of His Grace

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“They looked unto him, and were lightened: and their faces were not ashamed.”

—Psalm 34:5, *KJV*

By Trish A. Clauson

Abuse not only taught lies, but also it ashamed me. It disowned and discarded me like yesterday's garbage. It raped my soul.

Even though I was able to logically and systematically recognize the lies and replace them with the truth, I had no defenses against my shame. This was not a matter of low self-esteem, as all the books suggested. Repeating positive phrases to myself in the mirror did nothing to curb shame's capacity to destroy me.

With every episode, shame attacked my worth and my right to live. As difficult as it was to survive, it was more difficult to identify. The only way I was aware of its presence was through my outrageous responses to it. One of those times is etched forever in my memory.

It was the fall of 1996. Our entire family was together celebrating the Feast and I had done something to upset my husband. Instead of accepting that and moving on, shame gripped me, descending like a thick cloud until I was engulfed by it. It not only drove me to run and hide in some dark place in my soul, but also it caused me, for the first time, to physically run and hide. Eventually, I found myself in the office of a dear friend and abuse counselor.

I felt like a lost child who wanted to stay lost. I kept telling her I couldn't go back; I could not face my family again. I would rather die first! All I could imagine was their disgust and pity. All I could feel was my own self-loathing. I was no longer feeling

ashamed for something I had supposedly done wrong; I was now feeling ashamed of my shame.

As I sat there spiraling deeper and deeper into a black hole that offered no hope of release, my friend said something very strange. She told me if I was ever going to find real peace from this soul-shattering shame, I would have to let Jesus hold me. I was appalled! What a horrifying thought. I could never do that, I told her.

She insisted it was the only way. As I hadn't slept much the night before, she offered me the couch in her side office. When I awoke she convinced me to go back, certain my family was eagerly awaiting my return. I struggled to believe her, but I knew I couldn't hide forever. And, she was right. I had survived yet another war with shame.

In the weeks to follow I was bewildered by my response to her suggestion. Somehow it seemed abnormal. But, in spite of my repulsion to the idea, I decided to believe her. For the next several months I asked God to show me why I was so horrified at the thought of Jesus holding me. In time, he allowed me to see the mental image I had of myself. It was a large black plastic bag filled with rotting, decaying garbage, dripping a black smelly liquid. I was shocked. I didn't know that image was stored somewhere in my subconscious. It began to make sense though. Who would offer Jesus something like that to hold?

Besides, garbage is always in a state of decay. Nothing can clean or restore it. How then could his blood ever clean me? I knew that as long as I held on to this image, I would continue to feel I was a stench in God's nostrils. It had to go.

Recognizing the absurdity of this image, it didn't take long for me to accept the truth

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Shadow of Grace

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that I wasn't a sack of garbage. It was much more difficult to accept the origin of my shame. It was my parents who did shameful things to me, leaving me to hold their shame as my own. Realizing I couldn't ask God to forgive me for their sin, I had to find another way to be free of it.

For
freedom
Christ
has
set us
free.



Galatians 5:1

I decided to give it back to my parents. But they were both dead. So, in their absence, I brought it to the foot of the cross. I asked Jesus to forgive my shame, and then I placed theirs before him. It wasn't mine to carry anymore.

At that moment, an unexpected thing happened. I had become aware some years before of another mental image I had of myself as a child—a disgusting, unkempt, unwanted and unlovable creature. But in that moment, as I arose from my knees the image had changed. My little girl was clean and bright, hair in curls, clothed in a beautiful dress with patent leather shoes and ruffles on her socks. For the first time I saw my little girl free from the burden of shame laid on her innocent soul. Jesus had taken it away. I was finally able to see her through his eyes. Just as Psalm 34 says, the radiance of Jesus lightened my face and took away my shame.

Courage does not always roar. Sometimes, it is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, "I will try again tomorrow."



—Anonymous

Jesus had cleared the way for me to walk in God's grace, instead of walking in shame. But a great deal of repair work was left to do. Shame had filled my heart with self-hate and self-loathing. The only way I ever felt worthy to receive any kind of acceptance or respect was to stay disconnected from the part of me that was shamed and worthless. Now, I had to begin integrating back into me all the parts of myself I had hated and disowned for so long. This was no small task.

An even greater task emerged. If I was ever going to understand the benefit of Jesus holding me, I had to accept his love for me. But how could I—I didn't even know what love was. Abuse had completely twisted and distorted my concept of it. I had little sense of its meaning.

But that was about to change. God set me on a path to search out the real meaning of his love. Just as I had learned that truth would keep my mind free from lies, I was now to learn that love would keep my heart free from shame.

Next article: "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).



Trish enjoyed attending Connecting and Bonding in September and then spent a week with her daughter Rachelle, who lives in San Diego. E-mail her at trishan-



trishan-
son@juno.com.

God loves each one of us, as if there was only one of us.



—Augustine

The Strawberry Patch

By Dixie Marino

We live in the country surrounded by farms of all kinds. Our road home happens to go by a strawberry farm. Every year we wonder if this year's crop could possibly be as good as the berries were last year. So, we keep a watch on the strawberry patch.

I didn't realize the farmers plant the seedlings for the next crop almost as soon as the fruit-bearing season has ended. I fretted about the young plants because we were beginning to get some cold nights. They continued to grow, however, and I admired their tenacity.



Then the nights started getting colder. Some freezing temperatures were forecast and I fully expected to see some stricken strawberry plants. But they looked great, not droopy or brownish, but really flourishing. I got curious and decided to go to an expert.

As it happens, my granddaughter is married to a man named Adam. Oh, yes, and his parents and grandparents were farmers. I asked him why the strawberry plants didn't freeze and here is his simple answer. "They [the farmers] put the watering system on all night."

The running water keeps the plants from freezing. The farmer knows how to protect and keep the plants safe so when the time is right they produce fruit.

Now let us reflect. We start out as tiny seedlings in ground that has been cultivated and prepared for us. We get nourishment from the richness of the Word, and the Holy Spirit waters and protects us so we might yield fruit in due season. We have times when the elements seem to loom down upon us and we might think we won't make it, but the watering system is functioning perfectly. Then the beautiful fruit appears, not because of our strength or abilities, but because we have been so wonderfully tended.

The strawberry plants still have some growing time left before next year's crop is ready, so I'll be keeping an eye out and studying them for further reflection.

How is your strawberry patch coming along?



Maggie has been a bit lonely since Littleboy died, and gets clingy at times, but she's getting lots of attention from Dixie, so she's OK. Dixie and Charles are looking forward to becoming great-grandparents in December. E-mail her at cmarino001@ec.rr.com.



The reason people blame things on the previous generations is that there's only one other choice.



—Doug Larson

Great opportunities to help others seldom come, but small ones surround us every day.



—Sally Koch

Being a Light...*has a lighter side!*

I felt like my body has gotten totally out of shape, so I got my doctor's permission to join a fitness club and start exercising.

I decided to take an aerobics class for seniors. I bent, twisted, gyrated, jumped up and down and perspired for an hour.

But by the time I got my leotards on, the class was over.

—Unknown

Most of us have a bad habit we are constantly trying to break. For me, it's biting my fingernails. One day I told my husband about my latest solution: press-on nails.

"Great idea, honey," he smiled. "You can eat them straight out of the box."

—www.cleanlaffs.com

My friend has a lifesaving tool in her car. It's designed to cut through a seatbelt if she gets trapped. She keeps it in the trunk.

—www.cleanlaffs.com

A teenager lost a contact lens while playing basketball in his driveway. After a fruitless search, he went inside and told his mother the lens was nowhere to be found.

Undaunted, she went outside and in a few minutes, returned with the lens in her hand.

"How did you manage to find it, mom?" the teenager asked.

"We weren't looking for the same thing," she replied. "You were looking for a small piece of plastic. I was looking for \$150."

—www.cybersalt.com

If you want your spouse to listen and pay strict attention to every word you say, talk in your sleep.

—Unknown

My second favorite household chore is ironing. My first being hitting my head on the top bunk bed until I faint.

—Erma Bombeck

If a man watches three football games in a row, he should be declared legally dead.

—Erma Bombeck

◆ LETTERS TO THE EDITOR ◆

I (am submitting) an article to you for possible use in Connections. I thank you for Connections, it is a real boost to me and I love the articles by everyone. In fact, I pace so to speak waiting for the next issue. Thank you!

—Anne Gillam
Klamath Falls, Oregon

Excellent issue (Spring 2006)! Articles were great and I loved the little quotes sprinkled throughout....especially Anne Graham Lotz's quote on the page with your article. And we all got a kick out of the woman unplugging her husband from the television so he wouldn't be in a vegetative state dependent on some machine. Keep up the great work!

—Anne Stapleton
San Diego

I just downloaded Connections. It has occurred to me

how much I appreciate it and that I have not told you in a long time if ever just how important this is to me, I think a thank you is overdue.

—Shelba Stanley
Muscle Shoals, Alabama

Bonjour,

Thank you so much for Connections. Edna and I have just received the last issue. I just have gone through a number of articles and find them such a source of encouragement and a demonstration of the love of God for us.

—Eric Vautour
Dieppe, NB Canada

I found Nancy's printed copy of the 2006 summer edition of Connections, picked it up and started reading (in response to your request). After reading Kathy's and then Richard's bird story I thought (to quote

Hannah Knaack) [Richard], What the hell (to quote Pearl in Barbara's story) were you thinking?

Nancy and I share an 8' table as workspace for our two computers in our 2nd story office with a window looking out at the top of an olive tree growing in front of our townhouse. Until now I have enjoyed watching various birds come and go including hummingbirds. After reading Richard's story I sit here looking at the tree wondering what macabre tale would unfold if I peered into one of the abandoned nests.

Anyone who reads it can see that Connections is not "just another religious publication."

Thanks for providing space for such a variety of points of view.

—Ken Williams
Fair Oaks, California

Flee for a while from your tasks, hide yourself for a little space from the turmoil of your thoughts. For a little while give your time to God, and rest in him for a little while.



—Anselm (1033-1109)
Archbishop of Canterbury

To assert that a world as intricate as ours emerged from chaos by chance is about as sensible as to claim that Shakespeare's dramas were composed by rioting monkeys in a print shop.



—Merrill C. Tenney